

## Book Review

*Mollusca: The Southern Synthesis, Parts A & B*  
*Fauna of Australia, Vol. 5, 1998. CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne.*

Publication of this remarkable work represents a sharp focal point in the history of malacology in Australia, bringing together all that has gone before, placing it into the context of malacological knowledge developed globally, and providing a synthesis that forms a comprehensive base of future studies.

At the outset I must draw attention to one of the few difficulties I have in using these books. The work is cited as a "volume" and yet it consists of two books, Part A and Part B, that would normally be cited as two volumes. It is hard to be consistent about referring to them, in the singular or the plural. But that is a very minor problem. In content, production standard and usefulness these books have no equal.

The scope of the work is breathtaking. Everything known at this time about Australian molluscs - their scientific history, evolutionary history, classification, morphology, physiology, ecology, biogeography, larval development, utilisation - everything is included, and in the minutest detail. Furthermore, the sections are written by the foremost experts in the respective fields. There has never been a publication on molluscs that has attempted to cover the field of malacology so comprehensively or with such authoritativeness.

The vision of the *Fauna of Australia* series was conceived more than 20 years ago when the Australian Biological Resources Study was established by the Commonwealth Government. It was envisaged as an encyclopedial account of the Australian marine and terrestrial faunas that would serve as a basic reference for environmental science for decades to come reflecting "the deep and varied interests of all Australians in their magnificent and unique island continent".

The original editorial committees were aware of the magnitude of the task that they had undertaken and the fact that the project would turn out to be so arduous would be no surprise to them. In the foreword to the first volume (General Articles, 1987) it was noted that "meaningful descriptions to many families would be difficult because of the dearth of information". Accordingly, "production of the volumes containing the poorest known groups would be delayed until the 1990's". Acknowledging that the Mollusca was one of the better known invertebrate groups in Australia, this great phylum was selected for early treatment. And here we are, near the end of the 1990's and the molluscan volumes are finally produced. (Let us hope that the volumes on the "poorest known groups" do not take a proportionately long time to complete.)

The truth is that, in the 200 years and more since malacological science began in what is now Australian territory, far more knowledge has been gathered about Australian molluscs than anyone had imagined. The task of pulling it all together turned out to be formidable. Yet there they stand on our library shelves, two beautiful volumes that are a testimony to the efforts of

generations of people who devoted so much of their attention to the study of Australian molluscs as well as to the efforts of the authors and editors who struggled so hard to synthesise it all into one publication.

An important point to make, however, is that these volumes have a much wider relevance than solely Australian molluscs. The scope of the work is such that it will serve as a contemporary account of malacological knowledge worldwide. In the first place, many Australian marine molluscs are widely distributed beyond Australian territory. Also, the focus of these books is largely on higher taxa, that is, family level and above. At this level, all but a few Australian endemic taxa are distributed globally. Conversely, for many molluscan families there is little or no information about Australian species. It is a feature of these books that, when higher taxon level information is not available from studies of Australian species, information on foreign relatives has been "imported" to complete the taxonomic coverage. Consequently, much of the content of these volumes has global relevance. They are truly a "southern synthesis" but one which will be almost as useful in the other hemisphere.

Who will use these books? It should not be supposed that they are for the lay reader and they are not for bed-side reading. They are jammed full of technical information. A sincere effort has been made by the editors to make the text readable by non-specialist malacologists and zoologists but the nature of the material is such that readers with no technical background will find these books hard going. Nevertheless, they are an extraordinarily valuable source of information about molluscs. Researchers, environmentalists, students and collectors will find in them anything and everything that is known about Australian molluscs at this time.

Three of the most impressive and useful features of the books, as an information resource, are the comprehensive bibliographies, the index and the glossary. In order to minimise duplication, the references are consolidated at the end of each chapter, even though the chapters are generally multiauthored. The index and glossary are given at the end of Part B. Both are detailed and extremely helpful.

While it is not intended as a criticism, an anomaly in the layout of these books is the degree of duplication between the introductions of the sections dealing with taxa at different levels. This is a consequence of the taxonomic structure of the work. If a reader seeks information on a particular subject, it is sometimes necessary to look for it in the family introductions, the order introductions and the class introductions in order to get the full picture. Personally, I see this as a strength rather than a fault. Especially as the material provided at the different taxonomic levels is usually written by different authors so that there is some variation in presentation and interpretation which adds to the flavour.

The illustrations are superb. They have been produced by many different artists. The fact that their standard and style is so consistently high is a measure of the meticulous attention to detail and the persuasiveness of the editors.

To me the most remarkable feature of this work is the achievement of the editors in prising the countless manuscripts, large and small, from the multitude of authors and collating them to produce these enormously complex volumes

with such a consistent standard throughout. To those of us who have contributed bits of the text, it is nothing short of miraculous to see this whole work together as an integrated whole. Frankly, many of us didn't believe it was possible when the project began. The quality of the text is a credit to the standard malacology in this country but the creation of this volume is the work of the editors. I "dips my lid" to them. A fantastic effort.

In short, these two volumes represent a huge achievement by many people, but especially the editors, and a milestone in Australian malacology. The Australian Biological Resources Study must be thanked and congratulated for this extraordinarily valuable contribution to Australian natural science.

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